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Editorial office:
1333 S. Kirkwood Road,
St. Louis, MO 63122-7294,
314-996-1202

Published by The Lutheran Church—
Missouri Synod.

Please direct queries to
journaloflutheranmission@lcms.org.

This journal may also
be found at
www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission.

Member: Associated Church Press Evangelical Press Association (ISSN 2334-1998)
A periodical of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's Offices of National and International Mission.



ENDURING HOPE: THE WEST AND BEYOND

by Roland Gustafsson

Our heavenly Father addresses us in His Word through different perspectives and circumstances, even in times of hardship.

FOR YEARS I HAVE BEEN REFLECTING upon the tragic development in Sweden, Europe and the Western world at large, as far as the spiritual development is concerned. Christianity is on a decline, and we are deeply influenced by secularization. Nobody is unaffected by this phenomenon. From a missiological point of view, I am thankful to God; He addresses us in His Word through different perspectives and circumstances, even in times of hardship. For example, in epistles like 2 Peter, Jude and 1, 2 and 3 John, we learn about the preservation of orthodoxy. Furthermore, in books like Hebrews, 1 Peter and Revelation, we learn about adorning the Gospel in the midst of adversity.

Lately I have studied and felt at home in 2 Corinthians, an epistle where the apostle Paul opens up his heart and his ministry in an extraordinary way. He is mistreated and misunderstood but is defending himself in a very open way with a focus on the ministry of reconciliation (chapter 5). Let me share some perspectives from his experiences. I am sure we need this encouragement, in order to endure in hope, in the West and beyond.

Paul starts by sharing God's pedagogical wisdom: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Cor. 1:3-4). Troubles seem to be unavoidable, but God is a comforter in such situations. We somehow see a glance of the theology of the cross; one of the true marks of Christianity is certainly the cross — sufferings, hardship, etc. However, the message of victory and glory are present as well. "But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere" (2:14). It is an aroma of salvation and

damnation, of life and death is at hand. From this context we certainly acknowledge that the ministry of reconciliation is a wonderful ministry, a God-given ministry! It is not based upon man, but upon God. "He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (3:6).

Humanly speaking, there would be enough discouragement in order to lose heart. However, Paul is full of confidence: "Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart" (4:1). Then the apostle shares his personal experience, which I do think is most important in a context like ours as well: "We have

renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (4:2). Transparency is at hand.

Faith and good conscience are in focus! The agenda is to set forth the truth plainly by commending yourself to every man's conscience. This matter is certainly not self-evident in the Western world of today. On the contrary, there is a given agenda of accommodation. Little by little, step by step, you are forced to adjust your conviction received from the Word of God. Society and church must be ruled, not by God-given orders according to His revelation, but by democracy.

For its convention in 2005, the Church of Sweden published a book named *Democracy as a Successive Revelation*. Horrible reading, I must say! The given revelation of God's Word is "emptied," and instead human efforts are in progress to determine faith and life in society and Church. In Sweden we know the results. For example, same-sex relationships and marriages have been legitimate from 2009 onwards. Such a program is most contradictory to the given agenda of the apostle Paul. He

Troubles seem to be unavoidable, but God is a comforter in such situations.

is bound to the given revelation of God; woe to him if he does not preach the Gospel! “We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (4:2).

In Romans, Paul gives an admonition as far as this matter is concerned: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God — this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:1–2).

It is evident that this is not only a human affair, but that there is a spiritual battle going on. “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). And again it is emphasized concerning the given ministry: “What we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (4:5).

Meanwhile, there is not much of human boasting as far as this ministry is concerned: “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (4:7). And furthermore, the apostle shares a most contradictory and paradoxical experience — a catalogue of contradictions: pressed, not crushed; perplexed, not in despair; persecuted, not abandoned; struck down, not destroyed. It is a death and life relationship and agenda as far as the God-given ministry is concerned! Other catalogues of paradoxes are listed in 6:4–10 and 11:21–31.

How do you approach such a difficult context when Christian doctrines and ethics are questioned? Well, Paul addresses such a situation in the following way: “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete” (10:4–6).

In other words, a clear conviction and confession of the Word of God! And in accordance with our Lutheran Confession we teach and condemn in a similar way, as the apostle Paul puts it to his son Titus, concerning the ministry of an elder/overseer: “He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9).

Along with this God-given authority based upon Scripture, the apostle Paul also includes a sense of humbleness: “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you — unless, of course, you fail the test? ... For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth” (13:5, 9). Somehow, 2 Corinthians is like a manual for church workers in times of hardship and persecution. It is not only a defense marked by apologetic rhetoric, but it is filled with an attitude on the offense — the proclamation of the Gospel. In chapter 5 we have a wonderful

passage about the ministry of reconciliation: “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died ... All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.

We somehow see a glance of the theology of the cross; one of the true marks of Christianity is certainly the cross — sufferings, hardship, etc. However, the message of victory and glory are present as well.

We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (5:14, 18–21).

We endure in hope in the West and beyond, as far as the ministry is concerned, by following in the footsteps of the apostle Paul. Let me summarize what we have touched upon concerning the ministry:

1. God the Comforter comforts us in order that we will comfort others.
2. Christ’s triumphal procession continues, although the ministry is full of paradoxes.
3. Our competence comes from God, ministering a new covenant.

4. We carry out a transparent ministry in true faith and good conscience, without accommodation.
5. A spiritual war is at hand. The victory is given when Jesus Christ is proclaimed as Lord and every thought is made captive to the obedience of Christ.
6. Humbleness and self-examination are healthy signs of ministers.
7. All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

“Therefore we do not lose heart” (4:1, 16). May God grant us to be faithful in the given ministry until Jesus Christ comes in glory! Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

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